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ABSTRACT

The Chassidic approach to self-improvement includes an event called the "Farbrengen"--a Yiddish term meaning an informal gathering. At its best, it is a gathering in which Chassidim talk with each other about private issues, and may be considered the equivalent of group therapy. During a Farbrengen, Chassidic melodies which have no words are sung. Meditative and inspirational in nature, they often bring the singer and listener to the verge of tears, and many people have testified that hearing these melodies was the first step toward a true return to God. The wordlessness of the songs suggests the openness of the meeting, going beyond the limitations of language. Traditionally, some alcoholic drink is shared at a Farbrengen, as a small amount of alcohol can be a "heart opener," lessening the intellectual defenses which tend to hold back participants' true emotions. When a Farbrengen's participants toast "L'chayim!" (to life) they loosen themselves in their corporeality and begin to open themselves to the truth by sharing with others what is in their hearts and on their minds. Additionally, the Farbrengen's leader usually tells stories of righteous and heroic people of the past or stories about people he has known. These stories come alive because one can see the character transformation in the person who tells the story. Here was a living being who practiced what he preached, who had internalized what he had learned, and expected the same of others. (TS)

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Value-Oriented Cognitive Therapy: An Application of Chassidic Teachings

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**The founder of the Chassidic movement-The Baal Shem Tov**

In the early seventeenth century, after the Jewish people had suffered great spirtual and physical oppression, an individual appeared on the religious scene who was a great mystic and teacher, and shared a new, innovative method of revealing G-d's presence. This individual was the founder of the Chassidic movement, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov realized that the Judaism being practiced at the time was mechanical and empty of meaning. Although individuals were knowledgeable of mystical teachings, the masses were completely ignorant of all Jewish teachings. Practically, these intellectually and spiritually impovershed individuals were being looked down upon. The Baal Shem taught that the definition of a Jew is not one's body but rather his soul. He began visiting the simple folk and young children. He instilled in them a love and simple faith in G-d. He emphasized that the finest approach to Judaism and G-d should be through simplicity and sincerity. He brought together and built a bridge between the learned and the ignorant. He earnestly pursued peace and he accomplished it.

One story that epitomizes the approach of the Baal Shem Tov is the following: A child was in the synagogue on Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement. There had been a terrible evil decree placed upon all Jews in his city. The child wanted to ask G-d to annul the decree but he did not know how to read the prayer book. The Baal Shem Tov had his face covered with his prayer shawl. He stood in prayer for many hours. All the congregants knew that their master was exerting tremendous effort, wrestling with "G-d" to annul the decree.

Suddenly, everyone present, heard a scream from the back of the room. "Cock'l doodle do". Again, "Cock'l doodle do". They all turned around and saw that this little boy was the one screaming. Immediately they approached him asking him to refrain from yelling this out in the synagogue. Nevertheless the child continued. Meanwhile they noticed the Baal Shem Tov removing his prayer shawl from his face which revealed a broad smile. All the congregants knew something had taken place which annulled the decree.

They asked the Baal Shem what happened? He told them that this boy was not able to read the Hebrew alphabet so that he could not pray to G-d from the prayer book, to ask Him to annul the decree. However the boy was sincerely bothered by this decree and just prayed to G-d in his own words with great sincerity and devotion. All he knew were the sounds he would hear on the chicken farm, "cock'l doodle do"! So he used these sounds as his way of praying and asking G-d to annul the decree! G-d saw the earnestness of thi child, so he accepted his "prayers" and immediately annulled their decree. That was the point at which the Baal shem Tov smiled. (This was a mystical experience that the Baal Shem Tov had)

**Rabbi Schneaur Zalman and the Chabad approach**

This approach was developed and augmented by Rabbi Schneur Zalman, the founder of the Chabad Chassidic movement. Rabbi Schneur Zalman felt that since G-d gave everyone a mind, they were obligated to use it. He believed it is not enough to serve G-d with ones heart, but to understand intellectually G-d's greatness as



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well. This is accomplished by meditating and contemplating on the method of creation, the purpose of life, the harmony of soul and body etc.

The word Chabad is an acronym for Chochmah, Binah, and Da'at, meaning the use of the intellectual components of the mind with which to relate to G-d. These components consist of Creating the concept, developing the concept by Comprehending it, and actualizing the concept by Concentrating on it. This is known as the CCC approach to G-d. When these components are used properly, they result in "offspring" of healthy emotions which are then actualized. Rabbi Schneur Zalman codified a manual and guide for his method, called the Tanya.

**Mind over Heart**

A fundamental tenet of Chassidus is *moach shalit al halev*,[1] which means, "The mind dominates the heart." We can express this briefly as the characteristic of "mindfulness." Mindfulness implies that when your heart–which is the seat of your emotions–flares up and goes out of control, you have the natural ability to harness and control those feelings.

G-d has given every person intelligence to be used for specific purposes: for learning, for reasoning, but also for the specific purpose, of showing and teaching the heart how to be emotional and expressive. To put it in contemporary terms, you feel the way you think.[2] But this is not something that only an intellectual person can achieve. We know from Chassidic psychology that the mind dominating the heart is automatic and inherent.[3] The heart actually receives its vitality and life force from the brain; therefore it most naturally follows the dictates of the brain.

When the opposite happens–when the emotions take over–we are acting *un*naturally. That is why it is so disturbing to us and the people around us. We speak of ourselves as "overwhelmed by grief," "paralyzed by fear," or "overcome by rage." It is as if an alien force has taken over our selves. In fact, no problems can be solved or even tackled, no growth can occur when a person's emotions are overriding the mind.

The true meaning of mindfulness is that a person's being is "full" of mind, totally enveloped and controlled by the mind. This does not mean to become numb or to ignore one's feelings. We can feel our emotions, but within a mindful state where we can assess what is happening. We can see where the feelings are coming from, decide which has priority, and whether any of them are signals upon which we should act.

**Before you eat, you need to realize who gave you the food**

To accomplish this, we can train ourselves to put the mind first, even before our simplest acts. To illustrate: there was once a Chassid named Reb Dovid Tzvi. Before he ate, he would always put his hand on his forehead just prior to reciting the appropriate blessing. Then he would make the blessing, and only afterward eat or drink. His fellow Chassidim asked him why he had the custom of putting his hand on his forehead. He responded that when he was a young child, he had a private audience with the third Lubavitcher Rebbe (Chassidic leader), the Tzemach Tzedek, who told him: Listen to me: Don't be childish–always remember prior to eating, before whom you are eating! Afterward he accustomed himself, even as a young child, to be mindful of G-d before he actually ate, by putting his hand on his forehead, contemplating G-d and his greatness as the Creator, including creating the particular food he was about to eat.[4]

The argument is often made that powerful emotions are really out of our control. When an individual comes to discuss personal problems with me as a rabbi and counselor, I often hear, "I can't help myself, that's just the way I feel." This may seem to be the case, but it is not the real situation. The fact is, we have not learned to

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[1] See Rabbi Zalman I. Posner, *Think Jewish* (Nashville, TN: Kesher Press, 1979), pp. 20, 168.

[2] See Burns, *The New Mood Therapy pp 12-13.*

[3] *Tanya*, Part 1, Chapter 51; and Letters of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Vol. 1, p. 90.

[4] Heard from my spiritual mentor (*mashpia*) at a *farbrengen* (Chassidic get-together) while I was in yeshiva. Printed in *Book of Discourses* of Rabbi Y. Y. Schneerson (1943), p. 143. See there how this is an expression of maturity, of adult rather than childish actions, indicating the power of mind over emotions.

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utilize the true power of the mind, not only in spiritual and psychological matters but in very down-to-earth, physical ways.

**Joy shatters all barriers**

Once we understand something of our emotional lives from a Chassidic point of view, we can begin to discover real joy in our lives. In a letter from the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe to a person who was having all kinds of troubles and hardships, the Rebbe encouraged him to be happy. "Be as joyful as you would be if the problem had already dissipated."[5] He explained further that this is possible only by seeing the resolution of the difficulty prior to its occurrence. He then went on to explain the dynamics of our intellectual understanding that enables us to do this.

There are three faculties of the human intelligence: *chochma, bina,* and *da'at*. *Chochma* is the flash of creative thought, a momentary illumination. *Bina* receives and develops the idea, expands it into a structure of thought. However, it could remain only in the abstract, as pure speculation. The mind must become thoroughly saturated with it, turning the idea into something that is part of us, with conviction. This further intellectual movement is the work of *da'at*, involving attachment and union with the idea. *Da'at* is said to be the gateway to the emotions, for it brings together thought and feeling, brings the issue alive, even though it hasn't yet found expression in any specific emotion of the heart.

In slightly different terms, the three faculties of human intellect can be identified as the three "C's": Concept (*chochma*), Comprehension (*bina*), and Concentration (*da'at*).

Concentration, *da'at* exercises control over consciousness itself, focusing attention where we wish. It is ultimately the chief influence over the form and shape of the emotions. This internalization and concentration play, as Rabbi Nissan Mindel has said, "a decisive and dynamic role in determining the whole personality of the individual."[6] Your entire personality, at any given moment, is largely determined by the nature, quality, and object of your *daat*-focus.

Thus when the Rebbe says, "Be as joyful as if the problem had already dissipated," he is telling us to create a solution to the problem and focus on it with intense concentration. This shapes the direction of our emotions and brings us true joy and happiness. The resolution of the issue in the mind, even though practically it is still unfinished, is the key to approaching any problem with a positive, joyous attitude. An example given by the Rebbe is a politician who is extremely happy and confident during his campaign, even though he has no idea whether or not he will succeed during his term. Yet he feels confident with himself to the extent that he rejoices and throws big parties so that everyone else can be happy.

We see from this letter the importance of being happy prior to that "change of luck" we may be waiting for, before our problems actually disappear. Even while we are frustrated or involved in worrisome things, we must simultaneously be happy. As the Chassidic adage says, "The deepest sorrow and sadness must lead to the greatest joy, and the greatest joy must bring about the deepest sadness and frustration."[7] The two come together, not following on one another, for in fact they complement each other if used properly.

But one may ask, "How is it possible actually to implement this in our lives? It sounds great and wonderful, but I'm depressed!"

There is an important letter from the Tzemach Tzedek, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, where he addresses this issue. He gives the following advice:

1. Divert your thoughts from negative things to happy thoughts, even if they are mundane and trivial happy matters in your eyes.
2. Study Torah
3. Pretend and act happy, and you will become truly happy.
4. Don't listen to melancholy music, rather to happy and lively music.

These are steps anyone can take at the very beginning of learning to live in joy.

**Behavioral & Emotional imbalances: Loneliness, Friendship, & Criticism**

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[5] *Letters of Previous Rebbe, Vol. 1, pp. 414, 415, 416.*

[6] Mindel, *Philosophy of Chabad*, 35.

[7] Rabbi Y. Y. Schneerson, *Book of Sichos 5705*, p. 8.

Many people walk around depressed because they are lonely. Spouses lose their loved ones; many relationships are shallow and crumbling, so that many people are single and lonely. What advice does the Chassidic self-help approach offer for this epidemic?

**Loneliness**

There was a rabbi named Reb Meir of Permishlan. In his community the way to the mikva (Jewish ritual bath) followed a path up a mountain, which in winter was full of ice and was, hence, very slippery. Most people took a long, roundabout way, but not Reb Meir. He walked straight up the icy, slippery mountain. Remarkably, he always reached the mikva safely without a fall. One winter, people from another city visited Reb Meir's synagogue and heard the story of his trips to the mikva. They made light of it, saying they would do the same as he, and show the people in the shul that this was fairly simple, certainly nothing to get excited about. When they began their trek up the mountain, however, they fell and hurt themselves. They immediately came to Reb Meir and asked him how he was able to do this. He responded in Yiddish, *Az men iz farbunden auben falt men nit unten*: "if you are connected above, you won't fall below!"[8]

The problem we have is the inability to lift our eyes from the "filth and shmutz" we are engaged in. We see a world full of problems, and we tend to see ourselves in the same light. In the *Tanya* the Alter Rebbe discusses the inability of ordinary people to elevate evil thoughts.[9] If our focus in life is materialism and worldly matters, then regardless of how much we study, we will remain earthly human beings. What G-d wants of a person is to become a "heavenly" creature, as we exist in our human form within the physical world.[10] The way this can be accomplished is by being connected above–so automatically you won't fall below!

A famous parable in a similar vein: A king had a son who was not following in the king's footsteps. The king decided to send him to a distant province, without any money or means of support. When he arrived, he needed basic living expenses. He saw that other people earn money by shepherding animals, so he decided to become a shepherd. Soon after he began working in the fields, he realized how hot it was. He consulted his fellow shepherds, who told him they built little huts to protect themselves from the sun. "I don't know how to build a hut,' he said; "I've been living in the palace of my father the King, and everything was provided for me. I need help to make a hut." They replied that the king would be passing through the desert in a few days; and it was the royal custom that anyone who wrote a request on a piece of paper and threw it into his wagon would have that request immediately granted. The prince did as instructed: when the king passed by, he threw in his request for a hut. The king recognized his son's handwriting and realized he had ended up a shepherd in the desert. The king exclaimed, in great grief, "Look how far my son has fallen! If he would just ask to be reunited with me, he would have a hut, and no sun, and everything else that being with the King has to offer. But he can't get past thinking about his little hut!"

The moral is obvious. If we can't get past the mundane view of things, we will constantly encounter loneliness and hardships. If we connect with spirituality, which is eternal, we won't be lonely, because we have it within ourselves.

**Friendship**

Every few years in our modern culture people get bored with being contemporary, and look for outdated styles and the fashions of former years. We see this most commonly in clothing: what was out yesterday is in today; the latest styles are more and more traditional. All the more should we look at Judaism: Our heritage is rich with old-age "styles" that are very contemporary and modern if applied in the proper way.

Having friends is one of these so-called "old-time" fantasies. In my counseling, I have heard people say over and over again that they don't have friends; that everything and everyone is cold and shallow. This is a function of the "me generation" with its selfishness and egocentricity. A person once confided to a friend of mine: "I come first, second, and third." It's time to get back to traditional values that will enrich our lives, and one of these values is making and having friends.

The Torah's (Jewish Bible) handbook on moral and ethical values is the *Ethics of the Fathers*. A saying mentioned there says directly: "Acquire for yourself a friend." Part of living a moral life is to have a friend. However, a deeper look at the exact wording shows us something even more important. You should have a friend; but what if you have tried and tried, and you don't have a friend. What should you do? "Acquire" a friend--go and purchase one.

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[8] *Sefer HaToldas Rasha"B*, pp. 53-55.

[9] *Tanya*, Part 1, Ch. 28.

[10] See *On the Essence of Chassidus*, ch. 1, n. 6.

A person should go to the extreme of "buying" a friend. This doesn't necessarily mean to pay money to someone to be your friend (although this is what people seem to do with their therapists). What it really says is that a person has to do everything within his power to have a friend. What does "everything in your power" mean? Imagine an art collector who has at last found the missing Picasso he has always wanted: He will go to any length to acquire it, expending his entire fortune, traveling around the world, taking time off from everything else to negotiate the deal he wants. He is so determined to have that item he'll "go to the ends of the earth" to get it. The same is true regarding a friend. Our pursuit of friendship should be with complete determination as though it were the dream of our lifetime almost within our reach.

How do we know if we have a true friend? Chassidus teaches that a true friend feels for the other person's joy and misfortunes regardless of where they are. If your friend is in Australia and you're in America, you will feel happy when her daughter is getting married. Is this "ESP"? No, it is simply that true friendship is boundless and timeless; its impact reaches across the oceans, to the extent of motivating you to pick up the phone or write a letter, wishing your friend well. Affection knows no barriers and transcends the limits of time and place.[11]

King Solomon says in the book of Proverbs, "A concern in a man's heart, *yash'chena*." Our sages in the Talmud offer two explanations of the last word, "remove it," meaning remove the care from the mind, or "discuss it with others. The third Rebbe of Lubavitch explained, "with others"–who are others only in the bodily sense, but really are completely united with him for they empathize with him.[12] A friend is one who feels for you, an ally, one whose interests are your interests. King Solomon was addressing anxieties and worries; his advice is to open ourselves up to others who are more like an extension of ourselves, namely our friends. The advantage they have is the ability to see us more objectively, to identify faults that we don't see. So to rid yourself of tension and anxiety, get yourself a true friend. You can do that only by making friendship a true priority in your life.

## Criticism

Friends, marriages, and relationships have dissolved due to constant criticism. Yet we say that we value "constructive" criticism. What does this mean? How do we define what kind of criticism is healthy, and when? Sometimes we get upset with the individual who is giving the rebuke. Do we have the right to decide who may or may not reprimand us?

It is a Torah commandment to rebuke one's fellow when you see him or her transgressing the Torah, the purpose being to prevent the other person from going astray. The Hebrew term for this rebuke is *mussar*. In Chapter 32 of the *Tanya*, the Alter Rebbe explains this commandment. Many people think it means that a person who knows Torah should harangue everyone else to get them to obey commandments. The Alter Rebbe says on the contrary, the commandment only applies to a friend rebuking another friend. The Torah does not tell you to walk up to a person you don't know and "tell him off"; that would be absurd. The message the Torah is communicating to us is the importance of becoming a person's friend. Once you have established an ongoing relationship with an individual, you have made it possible for the person to want to hear your rebuke. Indeed, the individual will look forward to your advice and criticism.

There is a story of a young boy who studied Torah all night with a friend. Since they were awake so late, they were still sleeping the next morning when they would normally be getting up to pray. The boy's grandfather walked into the room, waked him, and said, "You're going to miss the morning Shema."[13] He continued to scold him for sleeping in, but the boy didn't respond. After the grandfather left the room, the boy's friend asked, "Why didn't you tell your Zaidie the truth: that you slept this morning because you were up all night learning Torah?" The boy answered, "When I listened to the rebuke from my grandfather, I was hearing sweet words. It isn't every day that I get to hear my Zaidie rebuke me, so I didn't say anything. I was hoping he might scold me more!" This is the way we should look forward to rebuke from a good friend.

How do we decide whether we are in a position to give criticism? Following are some basic criteria:

1. You, the person giving the rebuke, must not have an iota of preconceived prejudices against the other person.

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[11] *HaYom Yom*, 26 Shevat, p 23.

[12] *HaYom Yom* for the 25th of Sivan, p. 65.

[13] Jewish law requires the Shema to be said by a certain time during the morning.

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2. It must make no difference to you as far as your feelings toward him are concerned) whether or not the person listens to you. In other words, you won't be at all angry if he doesn't listen to a word you say.

3. You must be concerned for him, not yourself. If your concern involves your ego in any shape or form, then you have no business giving the criticism.

**Holistic Therapy vis-a-vis Chassidus: Farbrengen & Niggunim**

The Chassidic approach to self-improvement includes a unique and innovative event called the "Farbrengen"– a Yiddish term meaning an informal gathering. At its best, it is a gathering in which Chassidim talk with each other about the private issues that lie within their hearts. This you might say is the equivalent of group therapy. It is what I call, "Chassidic group therapy".

What happens at a Farbrengen? Chassidic melodies are sung which have no words. They are called *Niggunim*. Meditative and inspirational in nature, they often bring the singer and listener to the verge of tears, and many people have testified that hearing these melodies was the first step toward a true return to G-d. The wordlessness of the songs suggests the openness of the meeting, going beyond the limitations of language.

During my years at home, my father taught my brothers, sister, and myself different nigunim. Usually he taught them on Sabbath afternoon after we came home from synagouge. We ate, and all of us children wanted to leave the table and run outside to play. He said to us, "Sabbath is a time to relax, not rush your meal, and sing nigunim." He made us stay at the table and listen to him sing. He would close his eyes and sing with tremendous devotion. After certain tunes he would express to us his true desire in life, which was to forget about all materialistic pursuits and cleave only to G-d. His feelings weren't saintly or angelic; he was simply expressing a persons true goal in life, namely communion with G-d. During the nigun he went through a transformation, and we children experienced it too. None of us were superhuman; we were very simple, average people. It was the power of the nigun that made the difference in us.

Initially when my father would sing, I was bored. I wanted to leave, but he put his foot down and insisted, "You're staying here until I'm finished." I wasn't happy about that; nevertheless I listened and listened. Years later, as a teenager, I developed a love for nigunim. I would fall asleep listening to them. It took many hours to learn each and every part of the nigun, but I had the desire and patience to listen to it over and over until I mastered the melody. Here was part of the transformation. Despite my childhood boredom, the impact of the nigun took hold, and came back to me later in life.

Traditionally at a Farbrengen, some alcoholic drink is shared also, for it is understood that a small amount of alcohol can be a "heart opener," for the mind often limits the expression of our heart. We hold back our true emotions because our intellect builds defenses, saying to us, "Everything is just fine the way it us; you don't need to change." When we toast "*L'chayim!*" (to life) we loosen ourselves in our corporeality and begin to open ourselves to the truth by sharing with others what's on our hearts and minds.

The leader usually tells stories of great righteous people of the past, or the heroic figures he has known in his own life. In the yeshiva (Rabbinic College) where I attended many Farbrengens, the stories came alive because one could see the character transformation that had happened in the person who told the story. Here was a living being who practiced what he preached, who had internalized what he had learned, and expected the same of others.

After a few short stories, the leader encourages others to open up and, in simple English, "get into it." In response, people support each other to explore their inner selves, to acknowledge their difficulties, and to struggle for inner truth. This way of opening oneself is healthy. It is not just for people with long white beards who sit and study day and night, but for every person–even this younger generation–regardless of age, belief, or level of understanding. We have to take advantage of such opportunities because we now have the responsibility to carry on the teachings of our heritage.

During my years in yeshiva I had many opportunities to participate in these Farbrengens. I use the word "participate" rather than "attend" to make a point. If we go to a therapist's office, do we listen to the therapist and then sit back and say to ourselves, "That's a wonderful idea–I'll consider it"? If we did, we would be wasting our money. If we want to change (and otherwise why would we be there?) we have to participate, speak up, open ourselves up to the therapist. The same is true for the "group therapy" of a Farbrengen. To be available for change, a person must decide not to be a bystander but rather a participant.

I recall some of the deep emotions I felt. I wanted simply to let go of my ego and my pride, desiring only to be absorbed within G-d. For a short moment, the inspiration of the *nigun* was so powerful that there was no "I" who wanted to be one with G-d. There was only G-d who wanted us to be involved in his divine plan. I felt this connection physically, being together with other participants, being like brothers without any jealousy or greed.


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